I discovered these words of Thomas Merton the year before starting a master’s in medical sciences:

“Perhaps I am stronger than I think. Perhaps I am even afraid of my strength and turn it against myself, thus making myself weak. Perhaps, I am most afraid of the strength of God in me. Perhaps I would rather be guilty and weak in myself than strong in Him, whom I cannot understand.”

This thought haunted me as I struggled to believe that, one day, I could be a physician working with patients who experience homelessness and incarceration. Questions buzzed through my mind. Was I cut out for medical school? Could I take the intensity that everyone warns about? Standing strong in God was scarier than letting go of self-doubt.

Anxiety and fear crept into every day during the first semester. I would cry in an empty classroom and, five minutes later, pull myself together enough to walk into histology lab and study slides of kidney tubules. Nighttime was, and still is, the worst for my anxiety. I sat paralyzed at the thought of the work in front of me.

In the second semester, several things happened. My brother had a serious skiing accident, followed by major surgery. A friend attempted suicide. A high school classmate overdosed, and a young friend nearly died in a car accident. All the while, I was attempting to hold it together in my coursework.

In the midst of this confusion and my own anxiety, I could think only one thing: “Lord, I cannot do this alone.”

I was overwhelmed with work and emotions, and so I invited God to be beside me one moment, one hour, and one day at a time. “Today,” I told myself, “I will attend lecture, review the thyroid physiology chapter and the morning’s pharmacology lecture, and map the cranial nerves.” I asked God to help me focus just on that, now, and for the remainder of the day, and to worry about tomorrow when and if it gets here.

The beloved people in my life had taught me, in a harsh way, that tomorrow is no guarantee. I often feel guilty about my anxiety, especially when I have the privileges of an excellent education, a safe home, and abundant food and support systems. I don’t know why I feel it or why it keeps returning, but I know that I have a responsibility to use my privilege to address the injustices, poverty, and violence that plague our world. I do my best to address my anxiety, both for my well-being and for the well-being of those I serve.

My anxiety is always nearby. Managing it will be a lifetime’s work requiring vigilance and self-reflection. May my self-doubts be constant reminders that I cannot do this alone. May my fears be invitations to be in a relationship with God. Alone, I am weak, but God’s faithfulness,
forgiveness, and love are infinite. Thus, in God, my strength is unbounded, and I should not fear my strength.